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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP PDAS GLYN DAVIES, EAP/ANP, AND INR/EAP
USPACOM FOR LTC JENNIFER HUGHES AND DR. SUSAN MCCLINTOCK

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/24/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [FJ](#)

SUBJECT: DIALOGUE OPENS RIFT IN FIJI'S GOVERNING CIRCLE

REF: SUVA 400

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Richard K. Pruett;
Reasons 1,4 (B), (D).

11. (C) Summary. The move by Fiji's interim Prime Minister Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama to convene a "Presidential Political Dialogue Forum" (PPDF) to facilitate the conducting of a general election "as soon as practically possible" has opened a schism within the inner circles of the interim government (IG) between those in favor and those opposed to the forum. The rift could cause the departure of Bainimarama's close advisor John Samy as early as October 27. It also throws into further doubt the IG's commitment to the PPDF process. End summary.

SAMY'S CHOICE

12. (C) Dr. Sitiveni "Steven" Halapua, an eminent Tongan professor at the East-West Center in Honolulu who is also the "People's Representative" to Tonga's Constitutional and Electoral Commission, discussed with Embassy officers on October 23 his understanding of events leading to his selection by the IG as a "co-interlocutor" of the PPDF. (Retired Australian Foreign Service officer Robin Nair, an ethnic Indo-Fijian, is the other co-interlocutor.) Halapua revealed that John Samy, a key advisor to Bainimarama, had persuaded Bainimarama to proceed with the PPDF despite collective opposition to the dialogue within the IG. According to Halapua, intramural criticism of the PPDF initiative so affected Samy that he is now drafting a memorandum of understanding governing his future relations with the IG, and if the IG does not accept his terms by the date of the PPDF's opening on October 27, then he is prepared to resign immediately from the government.

13. (C) Halapua disclosed that interim Attorney General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum had rallied the entire Military Council of the Republic of Fiji Military Forces (RFMF) in opposition to the PPDF initiative. According to Halapua, he had to terminate a meeting with Samy on October 21 when Bainimarama suddenly called Samy away to a meeting with Sayed-Khaiyum and the Military Council. Halapua shared with us Samy's later account of the meeting. Sayed-Khaiyum reportedly excoriated the PPDF as an ill-conceived idea coming at the wrong time. Asked in which way Sayed-Khaiyum thought the PPDF ill-conceived, Halapua replied that the interim attorney general seemed to think that the October 9 high court ruling dismissing the main legal challenge to the 2006 coup had given the IG a sort of carte blanche that obviated the need for any conciliatory measures for the present. Sayed-Khaiyum also reportedly criticized Halapua and Nair as representing the interests of the international community -- by implication, in opposition to Fiji's national interests.

14. (C) Samy passionately argued in favor of allowing the PPDF to go forward. Halapua did not elaborate much on Samy's

arguments, except to say that Samy had warned Bainimarama that he would lose all credibility with respect to any future appeal for dialogue if he now aborted the PPDF process. It had to have been a tour de force on Samy's part, because his argument carried the day against the articulate and persuasive attorney general.

SAMY UNAPPEASED

15. (C) Sayed-Khaiyum's challenge before the Military Council reportedly still rankled Samy during a subsequent budget meeting he attended at which Sayed-Khaiyum was Chair. Afterward, Samy informed Bainimarama that he would no longer attend budget meetings if they are chaired by Sayed-Khaiyum. Bainimarama apparently told Sayed-Khaiyum of Samy's feelings, prompting the interim attorney general to ask Samy (perhaps patronizingly) "are you alright?" Samy reportedly replied that by attacking Halapua and Nair, Sayed-Khaiyum had impugned Samy by association. Halapua did not provide more details about Samy's spat with Sayed-Khaiyum, but he noted that Samy is an accomplished economist who had earlier turned down Bainimarama's offer to head Fiji's Ministry of Finance. Said Halapua, Samy's threat to boycott budget meetings is magnified by the fact that he possesses most of the financial credentials to be found in the committee.

16. (C) Samy's pique apparently did not end with Sayed-Khaiyum. According to Halapua, Samy still feels so hurt for being mistrusted that he is now drafting a memorandum of understanding to govern his future relations with the IG and is prepared to resign from the interim government if the IG does not accept his terms by October 27.

In the course of advocating for the PPDF, Samy reportedly concluded that the IG had never been very serious about instituting a dialogue with the opposition. Bainimarama had often blamed deposed Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase for not being willing to hold genuine talks, but Samy now feels that Bainimarama was simply projecting onto the opposition his own reluctance. Halapua claimed that Samy now feels appalled that despite his work with the IG for over a year, during which time he was the principal architect of the draft People's Charter for Change, Peace and Progress, or blueprint for reforming Fiji's political culture, those in Fiji's ruling circle still don't have a vision for how to get there.

17. (C) Halapua mentioned his surprise in learning that John Samy is not as some portray him: a Rasputin-like eminence grise manipulating Bainimarama from behind the scenes. He is, instead, as Nair has characterized him: the moderate in Bainimarama's inner circle. (Comment: Nair had earlier told embassy officers that Samy alone had been truly receptive to his proposals. Nair is himself a moderate but does not share Samy's access to Bainimarama. The only other moderate in Bainimarama's circle seems to be Permanent Secretary Parmesh Chand. Chand does not seem as close to Bainimarama as Samy or Sayed-Khaiyum and appears seldom to take an advocacy role on policy issues. End comment.)

FORUM MODALITIES

18. (SBU) Halapua and Nair are only now beginning to formulate their roles in the upcoming dialogue forum. Halapua had little idea yet of the modalities for the meeting, except that it would be held at the parliament complex in Suva and would include all 16 of Fiji's registered parties. Each of the parties will be represented by principals plus one. The IG will be represented by Sayed-Khaiyum as principal, accompanied by Samy. Bainimarama will chair the meeting. The meeting will be aimed at achieving an agenda and terms of reference for the PPDF sessions to follow.

19. (C) In light of Bainimarama's recent unhelpful stipulations that none of the parties come to the forum with demands, including any insistence on holding the IG to its earlier promise of elections by March 2009, Embassy officers suggested to Halapua that he and Nair try to impress upon

Bainimarama the value in his taking a light approach to chairing the session, presiding over, but not necessarily running, the meetings. As interlocutors, Halapua and Nair would foreshadow the role Sir Paul Reeves or his substitute would play in facilitating any future sessions. They could play an important role in shaping the context of discussions in order to promote genuine dialogue, so careful focus now on establishing ground rules and processes could pay big dividends for this and any future meetings. Halapua seized on the word 'process' and began to think aloud about seating and other arrangements. He toyed with the idea of flanking Bainimarama with himself and Nair. He was especially pleased with the thought that Sayed-Khaiyum would not be able to pass notes directly to Bainimarama but would instead need to go through Samy. (According to Halapua, Samy had originally sought to distance himself from the PPDF for fear his participation in it might somehow muddle his promotion of the draft Peoples Charter, but Samy later changed his mind because his participation might help to neutralize Sayed-Khaiyum's baleful influence.) Halapua added that he and Nair are in the process of writing out some ground rules for the proceedings.

BACKGROUND - THE FORUM AND SIR PAUL REEVES

¶10. (SBU) The idea of a presidentially-sanctioned political dialogue seems to have originated out of the April meeting of the National Council For Building a Better Fiji (NCBBF) in which it called for a forum of all parties, convened by the president, to discuss electoral reform. (The IG established the NCBBF to promote the adoption of the draft People's Charter.) Subsequently, Fiji's major parties, including Qarase's Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewenivanua (SDL) party, agreed to participate on the condition that the forum discuss more than just electoral reform. The idea for the Forum languished when Bainimarama made it clear he would not accept Fiji constitutional law expert Sir Paul Reeves of New Zealand as its chair, despite Reeves' endorsement for the position by the Commonwealth's secretary general. The IG had suggested three other names, feeling that Reeves was already too wedded to Fiji's present political system, which he had helped to codify as the chair of the Fiji Constitution Review Commission from 1995 to 1997. The Commonwealth's secretary general persisted in supporting Reeves for the role. Reeves reportedly believed that elections could be held in March 2009 as Bainimarama had originally promised the PIF leadership at its 2007 summit in Tonga. Reeves also reportedly wanted the Forum broadened to include more than issues of electoral reform (e.g., a date certain for elections), whereas Bainimarama was adamant that its discussions be limited to electoral reform. Bainimarama effectively sidelined Reeves by saying he would only accept him as an advisor or facilitator, and not as Chair, to which Reeves did not assent. Later statements by Bainimarama and the NCBBF then seemed to delay the convening of the Forum indefinitely by making it contingent upon prior acceptance of the Peoples Charter.

BACKGROUND - ATTEMPTS AT RESUSCITATING DIALOGUE

¶11. (SBU) Halapua and East-West Center President Charles Morrison visited Fiji in September to push their idea of a "talanoa" consultative process to bring the IG together with Qarase and other major opposition figures. They explained their ideas to Bainimarama, Qarase, Samy, Fiji Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry, resident heads of diplomatic missions, and virtually every other major political figure in Fiji, with the exception of oppositionist Mick Beddoes of the United People's Party, who was unavailable. They found most parties generally receptive to the idea but very distrustful of the other participants. Subsequently, Robin Nair, in his capacity as a member of the so-called Independent Monitoring Group (IMG), which was ostensibly established by President Iloilo to provide independent oversight of the preparation process for the People's Charter, made his own attempt at promoting dialogue. He attempted to persuade Bainimarama to de-link the PPDF from progress on the People's Charter. He also tried to sell the IG on the idea of using a well-known

conflict resolution group to lead the PPDF as a way to mediate an end to Fiji's political impasse. Nair was disappointed by Bainimarama's cool response to his proposals; the commodore promised only to take Nair's idea under advisement for later discussion with Republic of Fiji Military Forces' Military Council.

BACKGROUND - SUPPORT FOR DIALOGUE BUILDS

¶12. (SBU) Further impetus to the idea of a political forum came with generally supportive statements by New Zealand and Australia. Helpful, too, was the announcement by Opposition Leader Mick Beddoes that he had dropped his earlier insistence on first establishing terms of reference and was now willing to participate in a proposed Presidential Dialogue Forum even without an agenda. According to Beddoes, the IG and the representatives of the various parties could establish rules of engagement and an agenda at their first meeting or two and just go on from there. Beddoes' statement echoed earlier, more equivocal statements of support by both Qarase and Chaudhry. The October 9 High Court ruling dismissing Qarase's legal challenge to the 2006 coup clearly threw the opposition off-balance. These developments seem to have emboldened Samy to propose to Bainimarama a serious push with the PPDF.

BEGIN COMMENT

¶13. (C) Sayed-Khaiyum's argument against holding the Presidential Political Dialogue Forum at this time was at least half-right -- it is indeed ill-conceived, in the sense that the IG has given little thought to its preparation. Sayed-Khaiyum and other elements of the IG clearly seem to see little personal value in dialogue. They had surely weighed against the idea when Nair had first broached the idea of a PPDF de-linked from the Charter process. Bainimarama only seemed to have agreed to the PPDF on an impulse under Samy's suasion. He apparently had even signed the invitation letters to the forum before consulting with Sayed-Khaiyum and the Military Council. (On a conscious or unconscious level, this appears to have been deliberate, as though Bainimarama wanted to force the issue.) He apparently caved in to their criticism of the dialogue initiative before calling Samy in to defend the proposal. Bainimarama appears to have given little real thought to how a dialogue should be constructed or to what ends. Even Halapua and Nair, both intelligent men and major proponents of dialogue, were caught somewhat flat-footed by Samy's success in persuading Bainimarama to let the forum to go forward.

¶14. (C) By inviting even new and obscure parties to the dialogue forum, Bainimarama is able to mitigate some of the influence of the real opposition heavy-weights arrayed against him -- viz., Qarase, Chaudhry, and to a lesser extent Beddoes. He also ingratiates himself somewhat with the smaller parties. After suffering the opposition's slings and arrows, Bainimarama--especially if he resists the temptation to resort to his usual blustering--might conceivably even emerge as a sort of compromise figure if Qarase and Chaudhry eventually turn their rhetorical firepower on each other. Another, more cynical possibility is that some or all of the new parties are bogus and created by the IG in order to pack the deck at the forum.

¶15. (C) The likelihood is that Bainimarama will not succeed in playing a statesman but will resort to form by attempting instead to bully the opposition to accept the draft Peoples Charter as Fiji's vision statement. If the first session adjourns with a date for a second, it will be no small victory and would bode well for Fiji's ability to demonstrate progress at the December meeting of the PIF in Papua New Guinea. If the dialogue fails, the recriminations likely will fly fast and furious. The chances for the dialogue to survive the first meeting are probably less than even, but if the parties ever do settle down to a genuine give and take, they may find common areas for agreement on important issues related to election reform and confirmation of some form of amnesty for Bainimarama and his people. Perhaps most

optimistically, the parties represented in the 2006 parliament could agree to a choreographed session by a reassembled parliament at which the draft People's Charter could be ratified or referred to a referendum or early consideration by a newly-elected parliament -- similar to the historic compromise between Federalists and Anti-Federalists that led to the adoption of our own Bill of Rights by the First U.S. Congress. As Dr. Halapua put it to Embassy officers, dialogue may be painful, but in light of the alternatives, it still remains the preferred "soft option."
End comment.
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